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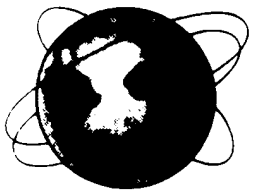
Thoughts on the boomerang spy — ideology, romance

Boston

IT should surprise no one that the case of Vitaly Yurchenko, the Boomerang Defector, turned into an exercise in fighting old Central Intelligence Agency internal battles as well as a new sortie in the struggle between the KGB and CIA.

Retired CIA duelists and their media seconds seize any opportunity to shape the record. And internecine spy wars play to a public ethos in which all too many media marketers want to turn political campaigns into drag races, presidential debates into judo matches, World War II and the Civil War into "Dynasty," and intelligence agencies over to James Bond rather than Adm. Bobby Inman.



Renewed fighting of the 1970s battle between the conspiracy theorists and the housecleaners in and around the CIA may add spice to the dramatic and puzzling Yurchenko case. But it defies common sense.

Some conspiracy theorists have tried to pin blame for Mr. Yurchenko's round-trip, retroactively, on two previous CIA directors, William Colby and Adm. Stansfield Turner, and what might be called the agency cleanup squad. By implication, the losers of the '70s battle are saying that the forced retirement of counterintelligence chief James Angleton and the later culling of CIA ranks made the agency too clean to be suspicious enough and tough enough in the Yurchenko case.

It's hard to credit a logic which argues that Yurchenko boomeranged because of actions taken five or 10 years ago. (That would imply that current agency director William Casey has been unable to put his stamp on the organization during the five years he has held power.)

Unfortunately, revival of this long-running argument tends to obscure two genuinely interesting facets of the Yurchenko affair and other recent superpower spy cases:

1. There has been a distinct change in the types of spies exposed or defecting across the superpower divide. Generally, though not invariably, the individuals selling to, or heading, East have changed from the well-educated, often highly placed spies or moles of the Philby-Burgess-Maclean-Blunt-Hiss-Chambers-Fuchs-Ponecorvo era to the petty mercenaries of what may now come to be known as the Walker era. The change in those heading or selling West has not been as well defined. But there have recently been several cases of better-educated, highly placed products of the Soviet system who appear to have become disillusioned.

2. Life may or may not be imitating John le Carré, but it appears that factors of family pressures and romantic involvement have become more common in the spy-defection business in recent decades.

Neither of these points covers all spy, mole, and defection (or counterdefection) cases. But it is clear that the era when Soviet spies and moles in the West tended to be physicists or highly placed establishment figures (Queen Elizabeth's art adviser and wartime intelligence officer Sir Anthony Blunt, Observer correspondent Kim Philby, diplomats Burgess and Maclean, and the near-recruit Michael Straight, a New Republic editor and one-time Roosevelt administration speech writer) seems over.

Recent purveyors of information to Moscow have not been twisted idealists or conspiratorial university friends. They have had generally mercenary aims not unlike those of sellers of high-tech secrets in the industrial espionage business.

Just why there appears to have been a rise in family-related pressures on the lives of intelligence operatives is not clear. The history of spying is filled with cases of furtive romance. People leading lives of national and social duplicity often find no inconsistency in adding romantic duplicity to their performance. Kim Philby provides an excessive case in point, having brushed aside two wives to run away with another journalist's wife when he fled to Moscow. He then dropped the latter to marry and then split from the wife of fellow-traitor Donald Maclean.

On the Soviet side, however, the disciplined, totally devoted agent of an international movement had long seemed the norm. John le Carré's fictional KGB mastermind, Karla, was an extreme prototype.

That image has been shaken by recent KGB defectors who deserted for romantic reasons or because of disillusionment with the way the collectivist system is running. And some redefections have been traced to anguish over the effect of the original desertion on teen-aged children

or other family members.

In one instance I know of, a KGB officer, now deceased, who was deeply troubled because his teen-aged daughter, a musician, sulked and would not make friends when he was dispatched to America. In another case, an American journalist calling on a high CIA official to check some facts in a story, was surprised to have the official answer the apartment door wearing an apron and carrying a potato peeler. He was preparing a stew for his daughter, and frequently interrupted the interview to help that daughter with her homework.

We may never know for sure whether Mr. Yurchenko returned to Moscow because he was a double agent assigned to shake the CIA, because of blighted romance, or for family reasons. But it does seem likely that the number of ideologically devoted Karlas on the Soviet side has diminished as the Stalinized Marxist doctrine has lost its pulling power.

And, as ideology has lost sway, other compartments of a spy's life inevitably gain importance. Yuri Andropov may have inspired some Karla types. But not many. And the universities of the West no longer provide fertile recruiting ground.

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